

BEYOND PLANNING: A CALL TO ACTION

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FEB 13 1986

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October 5, 1984

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There's a lot to be said for planning. There's even more to be said for making it work.

When it comes to public policy issues, the San Francisco Bay Area can boast of a remarkable record in the art of planning--that is identifying a problem and proposing possible solutions. Unfortunately it seldom gets beyond the planning stage. It's as if all the funding and commitment vanishes once the problem has been identified and a consensus reached. "Name an issue--and we've got a plan" could have been the slogan for the Bay Area regional policy arena during the past 20 years. Air, water, airports, transportation, hazardous waste, housing, open space, earthquakes, economic development, the Bay, energy and even garbage have all had their day in the planning spotlight. Combine these with the various subregional plans, corridor studies, "think papers", and tech memos, and you come up with a lot of planning--planning worth millions of public dollars and even more in work hours expended by committees, public agencies, elected officials, concerned citizens and public administrators.

With the exception of a couple, most of the plans developed to address the problems of the Bay Area have remained just that--plans. We in the region have largely been unable to make that important transition from planning to implementation. These efforts, many of which were touted as "planning gems" when they were unveiled, have been exiled to a sort of regional purgatory. They're not exactly dead, but they're far from providing the synergistic prod for regional action and leadership for which so many had hoped.

This could be the end of the story--simply a sad commentary on the lack of regional coordination, regional leadership, regional action. Fortunately, there's too much at stake for the region to concede failure. The plans may be sitting in an inactive stupor, but the problems identified and solutions proposed are still tremendously important to the Bay Area if

it is to continue as an economically sound and environmentally attractive region in which to live and work.

Why so much planning and so little action? The finger-pointing is endless. Blame the federal government or the state. They've been generous with planning funds, but downright stingy when the time has come to put them into action. Blame local governments who've been active partners in the planning process, but for the most part have been too shortsighted to look beyond local interests to the good of the whole. Blame the regional agencies that are often so protective of their own turfs that suspicion, lack of communication, and duplication of efforts often stand in the way of regional leadership. Blame the citizens, special interest groups and just about anyone else who cares about the Bay Area and have neither demanded nor participated in promoting regional accountability.

While many of the regional plans lie dormant, a few--transportation and air quality and hazardous materials--have managed to beat the odds and actually serve as living, breathing blueprints for regional action. Others have not fared as well.

Transportation

If you're one of the million Bay Area commuters who must contend with daily traffic jams and gridlock, it may be difficult to concede that this region has made any progress in transportation. It has--largely due to the money, clout, and leadership of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission--the keeper and primary moving force behind the Regional Transportation Plan. The plan was developed in 1973, three years after MTC was created by the State legislature, and it covers all components of a transportation network including highways, mass transit, airports and seaports. It made the transition from a planning to an action document when state and federal agencies gave MTC the authority to allocate all transportation funds coming into the region. Money--about half a billion dollars a year--has helped to buy a lot of respect for the plan.



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The major success resulting from the plan has probably been in the area of mass transit. BART, Muni, AC Transit, SamTrans and some 20 other public transit systems in the region look toward MTC to help support their day-to-day operations and capital projects. They can't take the money and just run. They must contend with MTC performance audits, productivity improvement suggestions and budget reviews--all with the goal of making the region's transit system operate efficiently. Other transportation projects requiring federal or state funding, such as roads and highways, must also get the nod from MTC.

The result has been that the Regional Transportation Plan is a plan that must be contended with in the region. Like it or not, transit operators, as well as cities and counties wanting dollars for transportation services and new projects, must demonstrate how their local wants and needs will fit within the larger regional picture.

Yet, growing traffic congestion and long commutes are still a major problem in the Bay Area. Many maintain that the problem is worsening as the result of inappropriate and short-sighted land use decisions. Those decisions are controlled by local governments. It's doubtful that any regional consensus will occur in this area without their support and commitment.

Although progress has been made, the region also has not done as well as it should in embracing commuter alternatives--car pooling, van pooling, bicycling, alternate work hours, etc. Most of these measures are voluntary, making them difficult to enforce.

Air Quality

Air quality was one of three major regional issues addressed in the Environmental Management Plan for the San Francisco Bay Area--the most comprehensive planning document ever produced on the regional level.

The Environmental Protection Agency provided funding to the

Association of Bay Area Governments, which, along with many other regional agencies, citizens and local governments, developed a plan hailed as one of the finest in the nation. To date, the air quality plan is the only one which has come close to being implemented. Water quality and solid waste management--two other issues addressed in the Environmental Management Plan--for the most part still lack cohesive leadership.

But the Air Quality Plan is a success story. Air in the Bay Area is substantially cleaner than it was 10 years ago--a direct result of the policies developed in the 1979 Air Quality Plan and the actions and enforcement which followed. The plan proposed to attack two primary sources of air pollution--stationary sources (small, medium, large industries); and motor vehicle emissions. It also encouraged voluntary transportation control measures and land use management techniques.

The muscle behind curbing pollution from stationary sources has been the Bay Area Air Quality Management District, which has continued to implement the existing and new controls called for in the 1979 plan.

One example of progress has been in reducing the ozone level, the region's most serious problem. Prior to the 1979 plan, the Bay Area was in violation of federal ozone standards 50-60 times a year. Violations have been reduced to about 10-15 times per year--still above the one year standard set by the feds--but a major leap forward.

The last major missing link advocated in the plan--a mandatory vehicle inspection/maintenance program--was launched in the Bay Area early this year. The program is viewed as critical in maintaining ozone and carbon monoxide standards and is expected to reduce vehicle emissions by about 25%.

Water Quality

The 1979 Water Quality Plan was supposed to clean up Bay Area waterways. There's little evidence that it was able to pull it off. In some aspects, the situation may have actually worsened in recent years.

Bay fish are still dying off in alarming numbers, high levels of toxic materials are still being recorded, and little has been done to curb what some feel is one of the largest sources of water pollution--surface runoff. These concerns, along with the proposed extension of the San Luis Drain and its cargo of toxic agricultural wastewater heading for the Bay, are more than enough reason for the region to get its act together in the area of water quality.

Instead, there are a variety of state and regional agencies competing for funding, duplicating efforts, and flexing their muscles, while Bay Area waterways continue to deteriorate.

The players include the State Water Resources Control Board, the Department of Water Resources, the Regional Water Quality Control Board, ABAG, the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, the Corps of Engineers, Department of Fish and Game and numerous others.

Recognizing that regional coordination was essential, the Water Quality Plan recommended establishing a San Francisco Bay Delta Research Advisory Council including representatives from most of the water "players" as well as discharging agencies and --most importantly--public and private interest groups. Instead, a weak version of the council, the Aquatic Habitat Board, was formed a year ago. It was established by the state and has done little in addressing the need for a coordinated monitoring program for the Bay, primarily due to lack of funding.

As a result, numerous organizations still spend millions of dollars each year monitoring the Bay, but there is still no established procedure for coordinating those programs or translating the results into action.

The lack of effective interagency coordination, coupled with little or no state/federal funding, has also hampered the region in implementing other key recommendations of the Water Quality Plan, including the developing of a long-term construction plan for municipal and industrial wastewater facilities; devising surface runoff control programs in each

county; and reducing vessel waste and houseboat pollution.

These are still valid solutions but due to lack of regional cooperation and dollars, they have not been put into action.

As a result, the region is left with a deteriorating bay and a water quality plan that could potentially save it.

Hazardous Materials

The need for a regional approach in managing hazardous materials first surfaced as an issue during development of the water quality plan. Several events brought it to the forefront. In June 1980 a white powder spill on the Bay Bridge stranded thousands of commuters for hours. Soon after, the cities of South San Francisco and Richmond were faced with the prospect of mass evacuations when chemical leaks threatened to endanger their citizens. The Caldecott tunnel explosion in 1982 tragically demonstrated the risks of transporting hazardous materials in an urban environment. These events, along with the controversial malathion spraying over a heavily populated area during the medfly crisis of 1982 heightened public interest and concern over the use, management, storage and transporting of hazardous materials. These concerns are legitimate. It's estimated there are more than 700 hazardous spills reported each year in the Bay Area.

The problem was addressed in 1983 with a plan--the Bay Area Hazardous Spill Prevention and Response Plan funded by the U.S. Department of Transportation. It was developed by an ABAG Task Force of state, regional, local and industry officials and focused on four major areas--risk assessment, prevention, response and training.

One year later it looks like the plan is doing what plans are supposed to be doing--being implemented.

Full regional coordination in preventing hazardous spills is still a long way off, but progress is being made, especially in training. The

State Department of Health Services has provided a grant to ABAG, and 14 local jurisdictions have donated matching funds, to develop a regional training program for local emergency personnel. The plan itself serves as a valuable reference/guidance document for jurisdictions preparing for chemical emergencies at the local level.

More work is needed on the prevention end, especially in working with transporters of hazardous materials. A model hazardous materials management ordinance adopted by Santa Clara County cities and a new state bill governing underground storage tanks have helped.

Federal, state, regional and local agencies involved in hazardous materials management seem to be talking to each other for the first time. Local governments are more informed, better prepared and able to cope with the issue then ever before. There's hope.

Solid Waste

The Regional Solid Waste Management Plan, adopted in 1978, has largely been ignored. Little or no action has been taken in coping with the region's garbage--6.2 million tons a year and growing.

The solutions outlined in the 1978 plan still make a lot of sense today. New landfill sites must be developed; waste reduction programs with an emphasis on recycling and energy conversion must be funded; and a coordinated regional approach to solid hazardous waste management must be launched.

Instead, the Bay Area is faced with 20 of its existing landfill sites reaching capacity and closing by the year 2000, with little prospect of new ones opening. Few successful recycling efforts have been implemented and there's not even a prospect of a waste recovery facility on the horizon. County solid waste management plans that were to propel the regional plan into action lie dormant and the consensus which was to materialize never took place.

Lack of funding, especially in exploring new energy conversion technologies, can certainly be blamed but a lack of consensus among local jurisdictions which are becoming increasingly particular about taking one another's garbage has been a greater obstacle.

So, the garbage problem grows.

Housing

The 1978 Regional Housing Plan had its share of lofty objectives--increasing the regional housing supply; maintaining and improving existing housing; expanding and conserving housing opportunities for lower income people; and eliminating all forms of illegal or arbitrary discrimination.

It was and is a good plan, but has fallen short of pushing the region towards any concerted effort in addressing its housing program.

Affordability is still a problem. Median prices for an owner-occupied house rose by 376% compared to a 211% increase in the consumer price index during the period 1970-1980. The region's vacancy rate for rental units decreased from 4.9% to 3.7% and is even greater in some parts of the region.

Housing discrimination, especially against those with children, the disabled, the poor, and ethnic groups is also still very much a factor.

The idea of a regional housing plan is really a misnomer. It can state the problem, prod, give a swift kick, preach--but there are other forces at work.

Even the best intentions in coping with the housing problem have been stymied by a fickle market over the last six years--rising inflation and skyrocketing interest rates have worked against the goal of providing more housing.

Local governments play a role too. They have authority over land use, density standards, zoning, rent control, anti-discrimination ordinances, etc.--all of which can help or hinder the availability of housing in the region. While a few cities and counties have used some or all of these measures in making a dent in the region's housing imbalance--others have taken a more parochial stand, failing to be convinced that their local land use decisions can help or aggravate the regional housing problem.

There have been some bright spots. The Bay Area Council, the regional voice of the business community, has been active in promoting the need for more action in the housing area. Another group, also backed with corporate funds, BRIDGE, has actually raised money with the goal of developing low to moderate income housing projects. Still, the demand far outweighs the supply and the region is left with another unfulfilled plan.

Beyond Planning

Regional planning has been given a lot of lip service over the past 20 years. Successes do exist, but they're few. Too many of the plans have offered so much, but delivered so little. Planning if it's going to amount to anything, especially on the regional level, requires several conditions for success.

o Money

Whether it's used as a motivator in enticing the players to play the region's way, or used simply to do what has to be done--money can do wonders for breathing life into an otherwise torpid plan. Take away MTC's money and you stop the region's transportation plan dead in its tracks. Convince the state to fund key provisions of the region's solid waste or water quality plans--and we might have a fighting chance to save our Bay and solve our garbage problem.

o Regional Leadership

In a region like the Bay Area with hundreds of local governments, special districts and special interests--someone has to be responsible for looking after the whole. Regional leadership has to go beyond simply implementing a water quality or transportation plan--beyond choosing between local or regional needs.

It starts with a recognition that the plans accumulated over the past 20 years are not separate isolated statements on a particular problem. They're integrated, connected--just as the local needs are integrated with the region's. There's not a local community in the Bay Area that doesn't want clean air, unpolluted water, or a better transportation system. How best to accomplish these goals? It can be done with aggressive regional leadership without eroding local control. In fact, regional action can and must work hand in hand in supporting and implementing local policies and goals.

Under the current situation, efforts are duplicated, turfs are protected and the Bay Area's five and a half million people end up the losers.

o Consensus

A cynic would say that once you have the authority and the money--you don't need consensus. Others would say that if there isn't agreement on what has to be done, there's little hope for action.

For the most part, the various regional plans represent a fragile but legitimate attempt at regional consensus. If they no longer represent an accurate assessment of regional issues--they should be amended or if need be discarded and replaced.

But once consensus has been reached on the problem and the steps needed to correct it, the commitment doesn't stop there--participation and compromise for the good of the whole are essential to make it all work.

It's time to move beyond planning. A new thrust focused on action and leadership has to take hold. The problems are large, but they're not insurmountable. The region has already decided what has to be done. It's time to get on with it.

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